The Little Match Girl

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

Hans Christian Andersen was a Danish author, primarily of fairy tales and short stories geared towards children. The only son of working-class parents, Andersen became all too aware of the inequities of the class system from a young age, supporting himself and his education through a series of apprenticeships. Though initially interested in a career as an actor, Andersen's passions soon switched to writing, and, at the urging of theater director and benefactor, Jonas Collin, he began to pen a series of works that would remain in the public conscience for centuries. Many of his stories, such as "The Emperor's New Clothes" and "The Ugly Duckling" have since become so deeply ingrained in popular culture that it is easy to forget they had an original author to begin with. Andersen enjoyed considerable success during his later years as his stories were translated and garnered international fame, eventually becoming the recipient of a stipend from the Danish government that allowed him to make a comfortable living as an author. This newfound financial freedom gave him the ability to travel, and he wrote several travelogues chronicling his adventures across various countries and continents. He went on to forge a friendship with British novelist Charles Dickens, bonding over their shared concern for the poor and working classes. Andersen died in Copenhagen in 1875 from injuries sustained after a fall in his home.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The story's focus on the bleak and desolate fate of the little match girl showcases the difficult effects of the Industrial Revolution, a period beginning in the mid-18th century that saw the rise of factory labor. Though this era of heightened efficiency in manufacturing brought with it many positives—including the widespread growth of the middle class—it was also responsible for creating several enduring problems, including terrible working and living conditions for the poor, severe overcrowding of cities, and rampant pollution. This age of industry was a crisis for many writers of the time, as large swaths of the population moving from the pristine rural countryside to the dirty urban city signified a move away from the traditional Romantic values of nature and spirituality and ushered in a new age of economic growth that came often at the expense of the most vulnerable workers. The way these societal changes impacted children was an area of particular interest, as the Industrial Era's penchant for unsafe child labor and general cruelty towards young people was a startling departure from the importance that the previous era had placed on a child's innocence.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Little Match Girl" is one of many works from the Victorian Era concerned with the cruelty and hopelessness of child labor, a common practice that led many children to an early grave. Though Andersen is a Danish writer, this motif is especially prevelant in British literature. British Romantic writer William Blake, for instance, provides a similar depiction of a child in peril in both versions of "The Chimney Sweeper" in his 1789 collection of poems, *Songs of Innocence & Experience*. Blake's idea that death was the only reprieve from life as a child laborer (presenting it as an angel's rescue) has echoes in "The Little Match Girl." Andersen's contemporary and friend, Charles Dickens, is also renowned for his focus on the poor and working class in his fiction, with orphaned and unfortunate children often appearing as his protagonists such as those in *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. The format of the fairy tale was also undergoing a resurgence in popularity at the time, as the world-famous Brothers Grimm had published the first installment of their now universally-known *Grimms' Fairy Tales* in 1812, ending with its final edition in 1857. The noted darkness and morbidity of these tales, despite being marketed for children, was likely influential to Andersen. Reverberations of that influence can also be seen in works from authors such as Oscar Wilde, whose novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* combines the folkloric underpinnings of Goethe's *Faust* with gothic and philosophical elements.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Little Match Girl
- **When Written:** 1845
- **Where Written:** Denmark
- **When Published:** 1845
- **Literary Period:** Victorian, Danish Golden Age
- **Genre:** Fairy Tale
- **Setting:** An unspecified city on New Year's Eve
- **Climax:** The little girl burns all her matches to keep the vision of her deceased grandmother with her, resulting in her death.
- **Antagonist:** Forces of nature/poverty
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

The Disney Connection: Several of Andersen's stories have

been the basis for popular Disney films and shorts, including *The Little Mermaid*, *Frozen*, and *The Ugly Duckling*.

PLOT SUMMARY

On a cold and snowy New Year's Eve, a little girl walks the city streets unsuccessfully attempting to sell matches. She is barefoot and freezing as a result of the dangers inherent to this harsh urban environment that she is far too young to navigate on her own, already having lost her slippers due to some reckless carriage drivers and a young boy who steals one for himself. The girl is cold, hungry, and alone as she wanders the streets, having sold not a single match nor received any charity. As the snow falls upon her uncovered head, she solemnly notes the pretty lights and smells of celebration and love emanating from the townspeople's windows while considering the lack of such comforts in her own home, both on account of her family's destitute living conditions in a drafty attic as well as her father's implied abuse.

Fearing that her failure to sell any matches will earn her more of this abuse if she returns home, the girl decides to take shelter in a small alcove. Growing colder and colder, she burns a match for warmth. To her surprise, the flame creates an imaginary vision of a large, hot stove that disappears as soon as the match dies. Spurred by this delightful apparition, the girl burns more matches and conjures subsequent visions: first, a bountiful holiday feast with exquisite table settings, then a wonderfully lit Christmas tree with beautiful decorations. The girl then sees a shooting star and recalls the memory of her loving grandmother, who is the only person she had ever received any kindness from. She burns the rest of her matches in an effort to keep her grandmother's vision with her, begging to accompany her in heaven. The grandmother grants her this wish, taking her where she will no longer suffer the indignity of poverty: up to God. The girl's body is discovered the next day, smiling and flushed with spent matches strewn all around her. The townspeople seem unaware of the grand visions she saw and the everlasting peace she has been granted in death.

CHARACTERS

The Little Match Girl – The Little Match Girl is a child who is selling matches in the cold streets of an unnamed city on New Year's Eve. She hasn't sold a single match all day, and while she is freezing and miserable, she doesn't dare return home without having earned money, since she fears her abusive father will beat her. To make matters worse, the Little Match Girl has lost both her slippers, so her feet are naked on the cold ground, and her hands are so cold that they are almost numb. Eventually, she becomes so cold and hungry that she decides to light one of her matches to warm her hands. In the light of that match (and the subsequent ones she strikes), she has visions: an indoor fireplace to warm her feet, a holiday feast, a bright-lit Christmas tree. Finally, she has a vision of her deceased grandmother, the "only person" who ever loved her. After striking the remainder of her matches to keep this vision alive and begging her grandmother to take her to heaven, the Little Match Girl freezes to death on the cold street and sees herself flying with her grandmother to God, where there is "neither cold, nor hunger, nor fear." Freezing to death on a city street while trying unsuccessfully to sell matches to wealthy people is a terrible fate for a child, but the ending is not depicted as wholly tragic: the Little Match Girl has escaped her terrible life and moved on to a better world in heaven. That the Little Match Girl's life on earth was so wretched as to make freezing to death preferable to continuing to live, however, is Andersen's indictment of the evils of child labor and rampant capitalism that disregards community and kindness. The Little Match Girl is surrounded by the light, wealth, and food of those around her, but nobody thinks to share with her or help this vulnerable member of the community, and even her own father prioritizes her ability to make money over her wellbeing, which leads to her death.

Grandmother – The Little Match Girl's deceased grandmother. She is described as "the only person who had ever loved or been kind to the child." In the Little Match Girl's vision of her kind grandmother, the grandmother carries the girl to heaven—the girl has in fact died, but the vision of her grandmother has comforted her and brought her to a better life in heaven.

Father – The Little Match Girl's father appears in the story in passing, when she mentions that she doesn't dare escape the cold by going home on New Year's Eve. She hasn't earned even a cent, and returning home without money would lead her father to beat her. The threat of her father's abuse makes her choose to remain on the cold streets, which leads her to freeze to death.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE CRUELTY OF POVERTY

In his stories, Hans Christian Andersen often highlights the plight of the poor during the Industrial Revolution, with a particular interest in how this tumultuous period impacted the lives of children. In "The Little Match Girl," he focuses on the titular little girl as she

struggles for warmth while out selling matches in the bitter cold of New Year's Eve. The story's morbid ending (the girl dies from exposure after she uses all of her matches to warm and comfort herself) is presented as a welcome reprieve from the continued suffering of her existence as a child laborer. In portraying the innocent girl's helpless, futile attempts to escape her difficult circumstances, Andersen shows that poverty is brutal, inescapable, and ultimately a worse fate than death.

By emphasizing the contrast between the little girl's bleak, hopeless surroundings and her imaginary visions of warmth and nourishment, Andersen draws attention to the stark divide between the lives of the poor and the upper classes. When the girl burns the matchsticks (her only source of income), she finds that their flames spark imaginary visions of comforts like a "big iron stove," a "table spread with a damask cloth and set with the finest porcelain," and a Christmas tree with "thousands of candles." These are comforts that are available to the wealthier people who surround the little girl in the city, but she can only access them in her imagination.

While these visions provide the little girl with emotional comfort, they don't change the harsh reality of her life. The city's callous fellow inhabitants—from the reckless carriage drivers "driving along awfully fast" to the little boy who steals one of the girl's slippers for himself—treat her with astounding cruelty and disregard. Furthermore, Andersen's characterization of the girl as being "cowed by life" extends to her home life; the drafty attic her family lives in is described as being "almost as cold as the street," and her father is so abusive that she won't return home even to escape the harsh cold. While holiday stories are traditionally lighthearted and feature luxurious celebrations and feasts, here Andersen portrays the comfort and joy of the holidays as things the little girl cannot access. The fact that the little girl can't enjoy something as basic as a warm room or a meal on New Year's Eve shows just how harrowing her life is compared to the average middle- or upper-class child.

Due to the little girl's tragic circumstances, Andersen presents death as a worthy alternative to a life spent in poverty, because it allows the girl to be free of her suffering and live with God. Andersen seems to suggest, then, that poverty is unreasonably harsh and incredibly difficult to overcome, and that death is often the only lasting escape. Among her visions of the warm stove and holiday feast, the little girl also imagines that her beloved grandmother has returned from death to be with her. The characterization of the grandmother as "the only person who had ever loved or been kind to the child" implies that the girl's suffering has been overlooked or even directly perpetuated by those around her. As a young, innocent child, she is truly powerless to overcome the powerful societal forces working against her, and her poverty also leaves her physically vulnerable to the natural world, as she slowly freezes to death on the street.

With nobody to help her and no more matches with which to help herself, death is the only possible escape from the little girl's destitute circumstances, since it is only in death that she will be with God in a place "where there is neither cold nor hunger nor fear." Given that the little girl grapples with all of these perils in life, Andersen suggests that poverty (particularly when suffered by children) is unjust and unbearable, and that a peaceful death is ultimately preferable to a life of barely scraping by.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE AFTERLIFE

Christianity was central to the culture of 19th century Denmark (Andersen's native country), and "The Little Match Girl" reflects this in its depiction of death as being beneficial and good: a means of transcending earthly life, reuniting with deceased loved ones, and connecting with God. By portraying death as a more positive outcome than continuing to live in poverty, Andersen suggests that dying isn't something to be feared, since it is only through death that human beings can be reunited with God and be free of earthly pain and suffering. This notion is not only an endorsement of Christian ideas; it also offers an implicit criticism of the industrialized society the little match girl leaves behind after death, which he suggests is inherently flawed compared to the Christian ideal of the afterlife.

In "The Little Match Girl," light is frequently associated with comfort and a godly presence. This presents itself initially through the juxtaposition Andersen makes between the "cold and darkness" of the city streets and the bright lights shining from inside the windows of the upper classes' homes, but culminates in the visions brought about by the "blessedly warm" flames of the matches. Andersen's use of the word "blessedly" implies a parallel between the reprieve that light and warmth offer from Earthly suffering and the eternal comfort that the afterlife promises. Similarly, the story's claim that a shooting star represents "the soul of a human being traveling to God" is worth noting in the context of the common association of shooting stars with wish fulfillment. The little girl's plea for the vision of her deceased grandmother to "Take me with you!" can thus be construed as a kind of prayer, suggesting that death is not something to be avoided—rather, it is where true love, happiness, and contentment lie. This is echoed by one of the story's final images of the New Year's Day sun shining on the little girl's corpse after she dies from exposure. This description emphasizes the notion that it is not Earthly comforts that save the little girl from her harrowing situation, but God himself and the comforts the afterlife offers over earthly life.

Andersen uses this Christian outlook on the afterlife to levy some criticisms of the dehumanizing nature of the modern industrial city in comparison to the bliss of heavenly life. The inhabitants of the story's city, for instance, are characterized as

reckless, selfish, and uncharitable, with the little girl not having received "so much as a penny" for the matches she is selling. Despite being surrounded by the flamboyant wealth of people like the "rich merchant," the little girl goes cold and hungry. It is only in death and in communion with God that she can finally be considered to have achieved something of wealth. Even in death, though, the wealth the girl enjoys is immaterial. Her visions of a decadent holiday feast are not realized—rather, she is simply reunited with her beloved grandmother and with God. As a result, she gains a lasting sense of peace, experiencing "neither cold nor hunger nor fear," all of which incessantly plagued her life.

With this, Andersen invokes the Christian ideal that love, particularly God's love, is preferable to any material wealth on Earth. Andersen further emphasizes this concept by adopting a tone of vague pity when describing the townspeople's muted reactions to the little girl's death. Being united with God is preferable to a life of suffering on Earth, as he notes the townspeople's inability to know "the sweet visions" and "glory" that the girl and her grandmother witnessed upon their passage into Heaven. For once in the story, the impoverished little girl has something her fellow townspeople don't. In this sense, Andersen is noting that, while the girl's struggles are now effectively over, the townspeople's struggles will only continue until they, too, are ready to pass on. By portraying the little match girl's death as a blissful reprieve from the oppressive, dehumanizing realities of industrialized life, Andersen expresses the Christian ideal that the afterlife is something to be revered rather than feared.

FAIRY TALES VS. REALITY

Though an author of fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen typically did not write rosy stories of royalty and magic, or triumphant feats with happily-ever-after endings. Instead, his works often dealt with more realistic (and often morbid) themes of betrayal, sin, violence, and—as in the case of "The Little Match Girl"—death. By using the conventions of the fairy tale genre as a framework (namely the story's choices of character, structure, and tone) alongside the morbid realism of the story, Andersen is able to subvert the reader's expectation that the impoverished protagonist will triumph over her circumstances and live a happy life. Instead, Andersen's fairy tale protagonist is caught in a crushing life of poverty that she cannot transcend except through a grisly death, which shows that the whimsical happy endings of traditional fairy tales do not generally apply to the real lives of the poor.

While most fairy tales show an impoverished protagonist triumphing over her circumstances, "The Little Match Girl" uses a bleaker plotline to show how removed the reality of the Industrial Era is from the Romantic ideals that preceded it. To do this, Andersen relies on certain fairy tale tropes: much like Cinderella's wicked stepmother, for instance, the little girl's father is bluntly stated to be abusive ("She didn't dare go home because she had sold no matches and was frightened that her father might beat her"). However, instead of being doomed to a lifetime of menial chores, the girl is forced into a much more disturbing reality of risking her life selling matches on the street in the cold. Furthermore, much like Cinderella, Andersen describes the girl as having "long yellow hair that curled so prettily at the neck," but he notes that she "never gave a thought" to her appearance, likely because of her low social status and the more pressing concern for her mere survival. This contrasts with the convention of the fairy tale genre that a poor protagonist's beauty helps her to transcend her circumstance: here, the little match girl's beauty doesn't save her. Instead, her beauty is destroyed when she dies of exposure, suggesting that in reality—unlike in fairy tales—a person's appearance is secondary to the hardship of their life.

The way Andersen depicts the power of childhood imagination (another common fairy tale trope) also emphasizes the story's difference from a traditional fairy tale. Whereas other stories might use imagination to invoke visions of enchanted kingdoms or other fantastical whimsies, here the girl imagines basic Earthly realities: warmth, food, and love. In this sense, Andersen portrays the grim reality of growing up in poverty, painting basic comforts as being just as unattainable and imaginary as dragons, princesses, or magic.

The tone with which Andersen narrates the story also mirrors the moralistic, emotional tone of fairy tales. The way Andersen describes the girl's poverty, as if the odds are continually stacked against her, is designed to invoke an emotional response of pity in the reader. His visceral descriptions of the "cold and hungry" little girl whose feet are "swollen and red from the cold" are a stark contrast to her "pretty" yellow hair, emphasizing the harsh reality of her life in spite of her youth, innocence, and beauty. An audience familiar with the convention of fairy tales featuring children with difficult lives may expect these mounting pressures and cruelties to be resolved with an eventual change in luck, and—in a sense—the story does resolve them with a change in fortune. However, this turn is morbid and bittersweet: the little girl's untimely death is a significant departure from the happy and fortunate escape some may have been conditioned to expect from a story of this type. Andersen thereby subverts the conventions of a fairy tale to force the reader to contend with the fact that real life does not always have a fairy tale ending.

By using the tone of a whimsical fairy tale to portray the crushing reality of poverty, Andersen highlights the underbelly of industrialized society. In doing so, he causes the reader to recognize the ways in which the Romantic ideals of fairy tales can meet their limits in a dehumanizing economic reality that does not offer children like the little match girl the basic necessities they need to thrive.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE MATCHES' FLAMES

When the little girl burns her matches to keep herself warm, their "strange light" brings wondrous visions of warmth, kindness, and celebration until she freezes to death when the flames burn out. The short-lasting flames, therefore, embody how the delight and comfort of escapism is only a temporary form of liberation from poverty. After spending a frigid day trying to sell the matches on the street, the girl uses them as a literal escape from the cold (to warm herself) and they also lead to an emotional escape through her visions, which make her feel comforted in a hostile environment. While these two aspects—physical warmth and emotional comfort—are nice for her, the escapism of the matches cannot last. After all, just as all the matches flame out, she is left with her unendurable reality and ultimately freezes to death. Andersen thereby suggests that escapism is an inevitable part of enduring such a terrible life because, though temporary, it can provide badly-needed comfort. However, in a sense, escapism is only useful when you're in a situation that you need help enduring. The little match girl's poverty is so dire that attempting to endure it doesn't make sense—she needs not simple escapism, but rather *real* escape that can only come in the form of death. So, just as her situation is too dire for the matches to keep her warm, her poverty is too horrible and unendurable for emotional escapism to save her in any lasting sense, and the short-lasting warmth and fleeting visions of the matches represent this harsh reality—they are extinguished, and so, too, is the little girl's life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor Books edition of *The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories* published in 1983.

The Little Match Girl Quotes

"In this cold and darkness walked a little girl. She was poor and both her head and feet were bare. Oh, she had had a pair of slippers when she left home; but they had been too big for her—in truth, they had belonged to her mother. The little one had lost them while hurrying across the street to get out of the way of two carriages that had been driving along awfully fast. One of the slippers she could not find, and the other had been snatched by a boy who, laughingly, shouted that he would use it as a cradle when he had a child of his own.

Related Characters: The Little Match Girl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

A poor little girl is walking barefoot through the streets of an unnamed city in the dead of winter, attempting to sell matches. The matter-of-fact way in which narrator describes the depths of the little girl's current misery in this introduction to her character invokes the tone that many fairy tale narrators take on as a way to build the audience's sympathy and engagement with the protagonist. This passage also notably features the sole reference to the girl's mother in the entire story, and its use of past tense may suggest that her mother is dead, leaving the little girl alone with her abusive father as her sole guardian. This implication adds even more reason for the story's decidedly morbid ending to be depicted as a transcendently happy one, as it showcases the level of tragedy the little girl has had to experience in her short young life. She has far more to gain in death.

The accounts of the little girl's interactions with the city's crass and uncaring fellow inhabitants also further establishes how sufficiently out of her element she is in navigating the city on her own. The carriage drivers and the boy who steals from her are only concerned with themselves and their own self-preservation, serving as a way for Andersen to levy criticism towards the callousness of city living and the inherent brutality of poverty and child labor.

"The snowflakes fell on her long yellow hair that curled so prettily at the neck, but to such things she never gave a thought. From every window of every house, light shone, and one could smell the geese roasting all the way out in the street. It was, after all, New Year's Eve: and this she did think about.

Related Characters: The Little Match Girl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

The little girl continues walking barefoot through city streets in the cold. This continued narration following the girl as she continues alone through the city is noteworthy due to it containing the only description of her physical appearance that isn't directly related to her poverty. This offhand manner in which this detail is presented treats the girl's appearance as a trivial concern, likely mirroring the way the girl herself thinks, as she does not have time to worry about or even take pride in her looks when she is so much more concerned with survival. Anderson subtly puts out the idea that this pretty little girl could live a normal life and enjoy the simple vanities and pleasures of childhood if she were only born into a better socioeconomic situation, creating more sympathy for the girl in the reader's mind. He furthers this subtle appeal to the reader's sympathy through the simple but effectively emotive way he depicts the girl's solemn recognition that she is surrounded by the very things she needs yet, through absolutely no fault of her own, simply cannot have them. In these sparse details, Andersen manages to paint a particularly devastating portrait of poverty.

> She didn't dare go home because she had sold no matches and was frightened that her father might beat her. Besides, her home was almost as cold as the street. She lived in an attic, right under a tile roof. The wind whistled through it, even though they had tried to close the worst of the holes and cracks with straw and old rags.

Related Characters: The Little Match Girl, Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 306-307

Explanation and Analysis

After walking through the bitterly cold city streets with no shoes on, the little match girl chooses to stay out in the elements and seek shelter in an exposed alleyway rather than go home to her abusive father. The girl's decision to stay out in the cold, dark night instead of returning to her home speaks volumes of the pain she must suffer there. For one, it is now made clear that she is selling matches at the behest of her father, who is cruel enough to send her out to work alone on a holiday, let alone in such poor conditions. While child labor certainly wasn't uncommon for this period, this kind of arrangement stands as particularly despicable, as Andersen gives no indication that the father is doing any work himself. He may not only be selfishly placing all of that responsibility on his young daughter, but punishing her for failing as well.

Andersen's description of the shabby and dilapidated attic also serves as another one of his implicit criticisms of the poverty that is symptomatic of more industrialized and urbanized life, as overcrowding and poor living conditions were known to be especially commonplace in the period following the Industrial Revolution. By making the girl's home life so pitiable, Andersen shows the reader that she truly has nothing in her life to keep her there and that her ultimate fate is the best possible outcome for her. While an audience may wish for some brighter tale of imagination's triumph, death is all that can release her.

> "Someone is dying," whispered the little girl. Her grandmother, who was dead, was the only person who had ever loved or been kind to the child; and she had told her that a shooting star was the soul of a human being traveling to God.
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> She struck yet another match against the wall and in its blaze she saw her grandmother, so sweet, so blessedly kind.
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> "Grandmother!" shouted the little one. "Take me with you! I know you will disappear when the match goes out, just like the warm stove, the goose, and the beautiful Christmas tree." Quickly, she lighted all the matches she had left in her hand, so that her grandmother could not leave. And the matches burned with such a clear, strong flame that the night became as light as day. Never had her grandmother looked so beautiful. She lifted the little girl in her arms and flew with her to where there is neither cold nor hunger nor fear: up to God.

Related Characters: The Little Match Girl, Grandmother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 307-308

Explanation and Analysis

While the little girl is lighting her matches to stay warm and create imaginary visions in which she can escape, she sees a

shooting star. The shooting star serves as the catalyst for the little girl's final decision to burn the rest of her matches and join her grandmother up in heaven. Andersen creatively plays with the conceptions his readers may have here, at once having the girl foreshadow her own imminent death, while also providing a morbid variation on the fairy tale trope of the wish-fulfilling shooting star. Despite representing the shooting star in this distinctly defamiliarized way, Andersen mostly adheres to the traditional story beat readers may anticipate, granting the girl the subsequent wish she makes in the form of death and passage to heaven. In doing this, Andersen may be making another conflation between the temporary escape offered by fantastical stories and the permanent one that can only be reached in the afterlife. It can also be interpreted as another recognition of the limitations that a child's imagination and wonder have in the cold and harsh world of poverty. Despite her attempts to escape from her physical and emotional misery, the girl ultimately knows that nothing she can conjure with the flames of the match will last long enough to truly save her, so she welcomes death instead.

❝ In the cold morning the little girl was found. Her cheeks were red and she was smiling. She was dead. She had frozen to death on the last evening of the old year. The sun on New Year's Day shone down on the little corpse; her lap was filled with burned-out matches. "She had been trying to warm herself," people said. And no one knew the sweet visions she had seen, or in what glory she and her grandmother had passed into a truly new year.

Related Characters: The Little Match Girl

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 308

Explanation and Analysis

After dying of exposure, the little match girl's corpse is found by the townspeople on New Year's Day. This final section constitutes the story's subversive take on the fairy tale happy ending, transplanting the "happily ever after" setting from the traditional magical kingdom to a heavenly one. The detail of the New Year's Day sun shining down on the girl's dead body is potentially significant, displaying the light's transition of sorts from the temporary flames of the match to the everlasting light of the sun, and by extension, God and the afterlife. Though her visions allowed her momentary comfort, it is only now that she can bask in their warmth and light forever.

The manner in which Andersen portrays the reactions of the city inhabitants who discover the little girl's body is perhaps also of note, as their incredibly blunt and emotionless response are a way for him to condemn the manner in which city life desensitizes people to such stories. When contrasted with the subsequent description of the little girl's newfound heavenly bliss, their mere muted statements of fact seems purposefully crass, again indicating that the little girl is truly the winner of this story, having achieved a lasting sense of peaceful escape beyond anything that she or the townspeople could imagine on Earth.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE LITTLE MATCH GIRL

On a cold and snowy New Year's Eve, a little girl walks the city streets barefoot and without a hat. Earlier in the day, the girl lost her slippers (which were too big for her) when she ran across the street to avoid two carriages that were going "awfully fast." She couldn't find one slipper, and the other was taken by a boy who—while laughing—said he could use it as a cradle for his own children someday. Without slippers, the girl's feet are "swollen and red" from the cold. She is trying to sell matches, but nobody has bought any all day—she is "cowed by life, the poor thing!"

By sequencing descriptions of her poverty alongside the cold, selfish, and uncaring attitudes of the citizens around her, Andersen makes it immediately clear to the reader that the harsh environment of the urban city is no place for such a little girl. Additionally, his characterization of her intentionally evokes the reader's sympathy and thus plays into the common fairy tale trope of the misfortunate child as a protagonist, potentially impacting where the reader may expect the story to go next.

As she wanders the streets, the snow falls on the girl's long blonde hair, which "curled so prettily" along her neck. However, "to such things" the little girl "never gave a thought." All of the windows surrounding the girl are full of light and she can smell roast goose from the New Year's feasts—something the girl "d[oes] think about."

The fact that the little girl's poverty is so all-consuming that she cannot even take pride in her appearance like a middle or upper-class little girl is meant to highlight her differences from typical protagonists in the fairy tale genre to which many of Andersen's stories belong. Although the description of her pretty blonde hair aligns with stereotypical images of princesses, here the girl's beauty only serves as an ironic juxtaposition to how ugly her circumstances are.

The little girl sits on a street corner against a building. Although she is getting colder, she does not "dare to go home" because she hasn't yet sold any matches, an offense for which her father would beat her. Besides, their house isn't much warmer than the streets—the roof leaks, letting the cold wind inside.

Andersen continues to layer on the levels of misery and suffering in the poor girl's life, making it ever clearer that life offers her no love or comfort whatsoever. Readers anticipating a normal fairy tale may think this is designed to build towards some kind of fantastical intervention, but it actually foreshadows the idea that she is ultimately better off in death.

With her hands "numb from cold," the little girl lights one of her matches to warm them. She holds her hands over the warm, bright flame, which gives a "strange" light. The match, it seems, has become an iron stove, and she is finally comfortable sitting by this fire. However, the match soon sputters out, which makes the stove vanish, returning the little girl to her reality.

The girl's first vision being something as simple as a warm stove keys the reader into the fact that her wants and needs are not magical or outside the bounds of reality. Rather, they are basic necessities that she is being denied because of her low status in the class system.

The little girl strikes another match, and when the flame hits the wall of the building, the wall becomes "transparent as a veil" and the girl can "see right into the house." Inside, there is a table set with "finest porcelain" featuring a roast goose that leaps up from its dish and waddles towards the girl. When the girl reaches towards the goose, however, her match goes out and she touches only the cold wall of the building

The cartoonish imagery of the goose in this vision is fairly comedic to imagine and not far removed from that of a whimsical fairy tale, but the quick cut to the harsh reality the girl inhabits brings the reader right back to the feelings of hunger and cold she is experiencing.

The little girl burns yet another match, the flame this time conjuring a brilliant Christmas tree "much larger and more beautifully decorated" than one she'd recently seen at the "rich merchant's." She smiles at the tree, which is adorned with "colorful pictures" like ones she'd observed through the windows of shops in the city. As before, the vision dissipates as soon as the flame goes out.

The fact that Andersen compares the Christmas tree and its ornaments to those of the rich merchant and the shop windows allows the reader to gain another insight into the little girl's level of poverty. The flamboyant wealth of those around her is something she is only allowed to see from a distance and conjure in her imagination, and serves to further highlight the wealth inequality between the little girl and the city's upper class.

The little girl views a shooting star create "a line of fire across the sky" and notes that her recently deceased grandmother (the only person to ever show her love or kindness) once told her that shooting stars represent "the soul of a human being traveling to god." Remembering this, she notes that someone somewhere is dying.

This representation of shooting stars as a kind of omen for death differs from the more common association they have with granting wishes. In some sense, this presents a conflation between typical fairy tale mythology and Christian ideology surrounding death and the afterlife. They also foreshadow the girl's own death. The fact that her subsequent wish to join her grandmother in heaven is granted as a result of the star is a dark abstraction on the stereotype of wish fulfillment in fairy tales.

The girl burns another match, this time viewing the face of her "blessedly kind" grandmother. She implores her to take her with her and, knowing that she will disappear "just like the warm stove, the goose, and the Christmas tree," the girl burns the rest of her matches so her grandmother "could not leave." The grandmother takes her in her arms and up to God, "where there is neither cold nor hunger nor fear"

The girl's wish is effectively granted in death, as she is no longer plagued by the cold and harsh realities of poverty and can live in heavenly peace with her grandmother forever. Her recognition that the visions she conjured before, though pleasant, were only temporary and hold no candle to the bastion that the afterlife offers reflects Andersen's belief that death is ultimately preferable to a life in poverty, and is the only lasting form of escape for such an impossibly difficult existence.

The little girl's body is discovered with all of her matches used up the next day, having frozen to death "on the last evening of the old year." Despite this, her face is flushed and she is smiling. The townspeople blandly speculate on her demise with no knowledge of the "sweet visions she had seen" or the "glory" with which she had passed on "into a truly New Year."

Although the fate of the little girl is morbid, it is portrayed as a happy ending, befitting the tone of a fairy tale because the little girl is finally free of the suffering that she has lived with for her entire life as a result of her poverty. The way Andersen describes the reactions of the townspeople suggests that they are the ones missing out on the glory of the afterlife, and that their "New Year" pales in comparison to the transition that the little girl has undergone. This suggests that she is finally being rewarded for the suffering she endured in life, while the townspeople are forced to continue their comparatively flawed, selfish lives on Earth.

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